

Introducing Loser

by Peg Herring

The Loser Mysteries begin with *Killing Silence*, published in 2012. I'd spent several months in a very nice neighborhood of Richmond, Virginia, called The Fan. Across a main highway from the Fan's genteel, lovely homes stood a drug store where homeless people hung out, which created a strange juxtaposition of haves and have-nots. Every day as I walked, I saw the same rag-tag group, who seemed well-acquainted with each other and the "rules" of living on the street: Hang onto your stuff, notice everything and react to nothing, and don't bother the "normal" citizens passing by.

When I left Richmond, there was a question in my head: **What if a homeless woman became determined to solve a murder?**

I wanted to introduce my readers to this unusual protagonist in an abrupt way. After that, I could back off a little and let them get to know her better. As a sleuth she has some advantages, since the homeless are mostly ignored. Her difficulties in the job stem from the unique way she deals with personal tragedy, which is mostly by avoiding others.

The character that formed in my mind became very real to me, but I wanted readers to meet her with no excuses. Let me introduce you to Loser.

KILLING SILENCE-Chapter One

First rule: *Don't answer questions.* They start with, "How are you?" Then it's, "If you were a car what make and model would you be?" And before you know it, they're asking why someone is dead on your bathroom floor.

"Loser! You got your head on straight tonight?" Opening my eyes a slit, I saw pant legs and ancient Rockport shoes. Following my first rule, I ignored the voice and closed my eyes again.

The second time was louder and accompanied by a gentle but insistent kick. I looked up at the owner of the pants. Verle had come out to the alley where I slouched against an ancient brick wall. He leaned over me, his homely face crunched with curiosity. It had seemed like a quiet place, out of the nasty wind that blew dirt in my eyes and made my nose run. Appearances are deceiving, however. And there's no rest for the wicked.

"I got a job for a hard-working girl like you if you're living in the world today. And if you're hungry."

I made eye contact to indicate attention and wiped my nose on the rough wool of my sleeve in an attempt at social acceptability. Verle made his proposition. "I need the hydro-vents cleaned. Got a tip that the health inspector will be in the neighborhood tomorrow, and they're, um, they need attention."

I stared some more, which he took for interest. "You stay after closing, clean the vents, and I'll give you dinner. You up for that?" When I continued to say nothing, Verle looked slightly peeved. "I said I'll feed you. Did you eat today?"

Now, *that* I knew the answer to. No. But I did not speak. Verle was doing well all by himself, and I have my rules: Don't answer questions—at least not until you have to. Speak no more than thirty words in twenty-four hours. Keep responses under six syllables.

My rules probably don't work for everybody, but they are important to me.

I considered the offer. Verle was the owner, operator and host of a small restaurant on Broad Street next to the alley I currently occupied. It was the type of place people go to for cheap meals with large helpings and not much in the way of ambiance, unless you long for the smell of fryer grease. He sometimes gave me odd jobs: sweeping the sidewalk, washing the exterior windows, stuff like that, and I trusted him as much as I trusted anybody. I knew what hydro-vents were, knew cleaning them was back-breaking, dirty work. It was not the offer of a lifetime, and probably everyone in his employ had already turned him down. With his age and oversized gut, Verle certainly did not want to climb up there and clean the vents himself, inspector or no inspector.

If anyone else asked, I would have shaken my head to indicate a no. When you work for people they talk to you, try to get to know you. Once that happens, they start trying to help you, whatever that means to them. The last things I wanted were talk, interest, and help from people.

But Verle was not most people. He did not chat, and he always offered a straight deal: work for food. In addition to that, a part of me that I had not been able to kill in the last year and a half liked the idea of being useful. On a cold night in March, fed and warm did not sound bad, either. I met Verle's eye and nodded once. His answer was a grunt of satisfaction.

The introduction between Loser and the reader is mysterious, like Loser herself. We learn some important things about her. She doesn't like to talk, she doesn't trust many people, and apparently there was a time when someone died violently in her home. As is customary in modern mysteries, we get a body (or the mention of one) in the early going, but it takes a while before that little teaser is explained.

I also wanted to establish that Loser is antisocial—or perhaps asocial. In the opening she has chosen a spot where she thinks no one will bother her. She's lost some of the social conventions, e.g., she wipes her nose on her sleeve. She feels no obligation to answer when people speak to her; in fact, it seems to have led to problems in her past. And she considers herself wicked, hence her street name, Loser.

But I also included hints that Loser isn't totally lost. She looks forward to work, even unattractive, difficult work, because it makes her feel useful. She has a simple relationship with Verle; she does chores for him and he feeds her. Loser lives by rules that might not make sense to you or me, but they work for her.

In this way I tried to give the reader an immediate sense of a flawed but salvageable character. Loser has lost her way, but in the opening paragraphs we learn things we can respect about her, even if she looks rough and smells bad.

Maybe she'll even end up being likeable.



Peg Herring is a former educator from northern Michigan. Her Tudor mysteries starring Princess/Queen Elizabeth garnered nice reviews from *Booklist*, *Kirkus*, *New York Journal of Books*, and *Library Journal*. The first book of her paranormal series, *The Dead Detective Agency*, received a Best Mystery Award from EPIC in 2012, and her Loser Mysteries, beginning with *Killing Silence*, hit many must-read lists among book reviewers.

In 2014 Peg stole her grandmother's name and started writing the Sleuth Sisters cozy mysteries as Maggie Pill. Maggie's younger and much cooler than Peg, but they usually get along pretty well.

Websites: <http://pegherring.com>

<http://maggiepill.maggiepillmysteries.com>